Operational Thinking in a Tactical Environment and Targeting in Iraq

by Major Bill Benson

The current threat environment in Iraq presents a series of challenges to conventional, linear methods of planning and conducting combat and stability operations. This fact demands that battalion staffs develop plans that address a variety of targets throughout the unit's battlespace and over the duration of its deployment. Using the steps in the military decisionmaking process to plan individual battles and engagements (a la the combat training centers) without developing a comprehensive campaign plan that addresses the variety of targets found in this environment is futile. Tactical-level staffs must think and plan at the operational level, as well as at the tactical level, to be successful. This article describes the current environment in Iraq and the techniques and procedures one armored task force is using to plan and conduct combat and stability operations.

Task Force 1st Battalion, 68th Armor Regiment (TF 1-68) is an armor task force operating north of Baghdad as part of 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division. When the task force moved south from Tuz, Iraq, into its current area of responsibility (AOR) on 25 June 2003, it was comprised of two armor companies, one infantry company, a headquarters company (scout and mortar platoons), a separate infantry platoon, a howitzer battery, an engineer platoon, and a civil affairs team. The task force later lost the howitzer battery, the separate infantry platoon, and the engineer platoon, and the infantry company was detached from December through February 2004.

The battalion's AOR measures over 500 square kilometers and is split by Highway 1, the primary north-south main supply route (MSR) in Iraq. The main population center is the Tarmiyah district, an outer agrarian suburb of the Baghdad Governate with an estimated population of 150,000. The AOR also includes an area south of the Balad airfield (corps logistics support area) that belongs to the Salah Din Governate. With the exception of Highway 1 and a few paved roads, irrigation canals and dirt roads dominate the area and become nearly impassable in wet weather. The area is host to the homes and farms of a large number of high-ranking Baathists, including "Chemical Ali" and others directly related to the former dictator. The population is highly tribal and generally unwilling to work with the coalition, unless coerced by money, force, or shame. To date, no local leader has come forward with relevant information about enemy attackers, and recruiting and arming attack cells continue.

The enemy has conducted more than 170 attacks in the area of operation (AO) just since June 2003. These have included mortar and rocket attacks on forward operating bases, rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) and small arms ambushes, and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks. In addition to attacks on coalition forces, the attackers have targeted contractors, police, local leaders, and Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC) soldiers. The task force's primary tactical missions include raids, cordon and searches, area security, route security, area and route reconnais-

sance, and mounted/dismounted ambushes. The task force has detained over 400 Iraqis and killed or wounded unknown numbers. Additionally, the task force has spent $1.1 million rebuilding 16 schools, completing irrigation projects, reforming the local government, and recruiting and training local police and more than 180 ICDC soldiers.

Most of us who have been assigned to battalion and higher staffs are familiar with the targeting meeting as a method to plan and coordinate lethal, and in some cases, nonlethal indirect fires. In a traditional role, the targeting meeting and targeting cell is most often used to address "deep" targets. On a linear battlefield, "deep" denotes distance. On a nonlinear battlefield, the term "deep" may denote distance, but also should be understood in terms of time. In this environment, a target may in fact be within a unit's area of effects, but because of incomplete intelligence, lack of available combat power, or political considerations, the unit may be unable or unwilling to engage the target with any immediacy. In this instance, the target's "depth" refers to its relevance to the current task force mission, as well as the ability of the task force to effectively engage the target.

Further complicating the planning process is the quantity and variety of targets and the length of time the unit must stay engaged. In an environment such as Iraq, battalions that address only certain types of targets, or address them without taking into account the third and fourth orders effects, may find themselves successfully accomplishing individual tactical operations without coming any closer to achieving desired goals or an endstate. While this may work on a conventional, linear battlefield with a well-defined enemy and endstate, it falls short in Iraq. The variables are too many and the endstate too ambiguous at the tactical level. In this environment, a long-term plan, what could be referred to as a campaign plan, becomes a necessity. Accounting for environmental and mission variables while developing a plan that links various tactical-level engagements begins with visualizing the battlefield.

Visualizing the Battlefield — Defining the Tactical Problem

Visualizing the battlefield begins with the staff defining the tactical problem for the commander. In conventional combat operations, the tactical problem is usually associated with destroying enemy formations or seizing a piece of key terrain. Following major combat operations in Iraq, this approach would not work simply because defeating or destroying the main attack cell (assuming it could be identified), or occupying a specific piece of ground in the battalion AOR did not (and does not) equate to long-term success or mission completion. In Iraq, as in any environment requiring a unit to sustain combat and stability operations over an extended period of time, the staff must look beyond planning for individual battles and engagements and must instead think operationally, linking the various engagements into a comprehensive campaign plan. This is a departure from U.S. Army doctrine, which clearly places battalions at the tactical level of war.

Battalions develop these plans to link combat and stability operations and solve commanders' tactical problems. In Iraq, the majority of task force operations relate to long-term tasks that require synchronization and simultaneous execution to be effective. TF 1-68 is responsible for training and equipping local police forces, establishing a viable local government, recruiting, training, and equipping the ICDC, securing the corps' MSR and logistics supply area (LSA), improving local infrastructure, and countering anticoalition information operations (IO). Of course, the task of destroying/defeating the enemy is omnipresent.

In this environment, targeting and destroying one attack cell is just one of many tasks to accomplish, and prioritizing resources against these tasks may mean some other task is not accomplished. Additionally, the method used to target the attack cell will impact all other tasks. For example, conducting a raid on a known attack cell that results in the death of innocent civilians may turn the local populace against the task force. As a result, the enemy finds it easier to recruit new members, the local police refuse to work with the coalition, ICDC soldiers quit and offer their knowledge of U.S. capabilities to the enemy, the local mayor resigns, and the population conducts demonstrations and produces flyers denouncing the coalition, just to name a few. This may be oversimplifying the situation, but these effects are being witnessed in Iraq and must be considered when developing tactical plans. So, when the staff attempts to define tactical problems for commanders, it must look beyond the obvious tactical targets and instead define tactical problems in relation to overall, long-term objectives.

The simple answer is to define the tactical problem by linking it to the purpose or endstate found in the higher headquarters' mission statement or commander's intent. The reality is that the purpose and endstate issued by higher headquarters may still be tied to the original, combat-centric task of destroying the enemy and not to the reality of securing an AOR and preparing a local population for self-governance. The staff owes the commander a recommendation and must be perceptive in recognizing and defining the tactical problem without specific guidance from higher. This is especially important in periods of transition from combat operations to combat *and* stability operations. In the case of TF 1-68, the tactical

problem became how to set conditions to transition to a functioning civilian government.

Recommendations for Intent

Once the tactical problem is defined, the commander develops his intent to guide the staff's planning. Because of the complexity of the environment, the staff, S3, and XO, should expect to work with the commander on developing his intent. A recommendation for intent includes discussion of the decisive point, critical events, and endstate (friendly and enemy). The endstate should be tied directly to accomplishing the mission (tactical problem). The critical events become the task force's decisive and shaping operations. For TF 1-68, the decisive point became difficult to define. At the tactical level, the decisive point would normally be defined by an enemy's formation and capability, or a piece of terrain.

When the task force arrived in its AOR, it had practically no specific enemy intelligence and no obvious decisive terrain. The corps' MSR and LSA obviously had to be protected, but security operations are rarely decisive. The enemy was conducting frequent attacks against coalition forces traveling Highway 1, but reacting to contact is not decisive in relation to achieving a stated purpose and arriving at an endstate. Because of the lack of intelligence and unwillingness by the locals to divulge information, the task force rarely had actionable intelligence available to plan against targets. Many, if not most, of the offensive operations conducted by the task force during the first 5 to 6 months were the result of walk-up sources or actual contact that required immediate reaction. Little specific, offensive, tactical-level planning was conducted at the task force level.

Despite these problems, the task force was convinced that defeating the enemy was the decisive operation. But what was the decisive point and at what specific point would the task force win? Could a decisive point even be identified in this environment? The answer is "yes," but it required the task force staff and com-

mander to think above the tactical level and consider the overall plan — the campaign plan.

The only center of gravity the task force could identify in the AO was the power that local sheikhs, government officials, and former Baath party officials held over the local community. For example, the mayor of Tarmiyah had purported ties to "Chemical Ali." He and the other local officials, such as the chief of police, maintained their influence over the local population through fear and extortion, in conjunction with many other local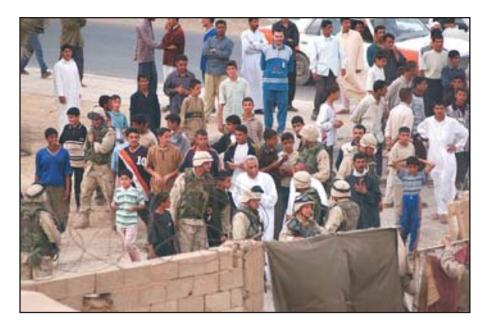 Baathists who actively supported returning Saddam to power. Because the power of these individuals influenced all of the task force's critical events, breaking that influence became the task force's decisive point. Because the task force initially could not attack this decisive point through planned offensive operations, it used its shaping operations, such as destabilizing influence and encouraging local support and informants, to set the conditions. Each of these operations required a long-term vision and plan. Once the vision/intent was developed, linking the vision and campaign plan to specific tactical operations became the purpose of the task force's targeting meeting.

Targeting

The task force's approach to targeting is simple: list decisive and shaping operations (based on critical events) developed in the campaign plan; determine the desired effects; and develop targets that contribute to accomplishing those effects. Targets were limited to those that required or demanded task force-level planning or resources to address.

During June and July, because of a lack of enemy intelligence, there were relatively few actual targets listed under the

decisive operation — "defeat the enemy." However, by January there were over 40 named targets, grouped by attack cell. As targets were captured or killed, their names were removed. If a target had been on the list for several weeks with several unsuccessful attempts at engaging and no new intelligence gathered, it would drop below the line. The same situation was true with shaping operations. Under "secure the area of operations," the police chief became a target early on because of some unconfirmed reports of inappropriate activity. The effect for that target was to make a decision on whether to keep him as the police chief or fire him. Based on that effect, a number of methods were developed to gather the needed information, which units were tasked to collect.

Once the information was gathered and the decision was made to fire the police chief, the effect changed to "fire the police chief." A new method was then developed that included identifying and hiring replacements. Even the specific method of firing was discussed to determine the wider impact of the operation, such as to fire him publicly or privately, detain him, have the local police arrest him, and whom to place as the interim police chief. The ultimate decision was to fire him in person, banish him from the area, and conduct an IO campaign with handouts explaining why he was removed and who would now be in charge. Ultimately, the task force had to fire the interim police chief as well, but because of the IO campaign and other operations conducted simultaneously, such as increasing police patrols in the area, the firings actually had a positive outcome with the population.

This technique of adapting a conventional tool (the targeting matrix) for use in tracking, prioritizing, and delineating targets related to combat *and* stability oper-

Operation	#	Effect	Target	Location	Means	Method	Assessment
Defeat the Enemy (Decisive)	1	Defeat Ghamizy Attack Cell	High-Value Target #1	MC123445	BN TF	Raid on **JAN 04	
	2		High-Value Target #2	MC125678	BN TF	Raid on **JAN 04	
	3		High-Value Target #3	MC127654	BN TF	Raid on **JAN 04	

Figure 1. Example of Targeting Matrix for Defeat the Enemy

Operation	#	Effect	Target	Location	Means	Method	Assessment
Secure the AOR (Shaping)	1	Install an effective county police chief	Tarmiyah Police Chief	MC123445	S2 CA S6	Interview local residents and police; inspect police records, check on police operations	Recommend to fire police chief based on ineffective policing and reports of extortion and bribes
	2	Police can communicate throughout county	Tarmiyah Police Force	Police Station	S4-contracting	Purchase radios	Limited to 50k on contracting, follow up on *** JAN with BDE
	3	Uninterrupted power at police stations	Tarmiyah Police Force	Police Station	S5 S4	Determine requirement, purchase generator	Unreliable local power, recommend purchase 100 KW generator

Figure 2. Example of Targeting Matrix for Secure the AOR

Operation	#	Effect	Target	Location	Means	Method	Assessment
Improve Infrastructure (Shaping)	1	Improve schools in Mushaedah	1 boys school, 2 girls schools	MC123445, MC987654, MC567765	CA	Accept bids on named schools up to 70K, half payment available at start of work	
	2	Improve drinking water in county	County water supply	TBD	Animal Company CMO	Recon water distro plant NLT 24 DEC	County Engineer to list problems and make bid for work
	3	Improve gasoline supply	Gasoline stations	MC123678 MC098765 MC236745	All units CA	Distribute IO product on rules and procedures regarding black marketing of gasoline; detain individuals who violate new regulations	Not all citizens know of new regulations; continue with IO campaign

Figure 3. Example of Targeting Matrix for Improve Infrastructure

ations was cumbersome at first. The staff struggled with definitions and format. After a few weeks, however, the task force commander and staff relied on this matrix to coordinate and synchronize battalion resources to address more than 60 targets at a time, which ranged from high-ranking Baath party members to lower level attackers, sheikhs, city councilmen, school rebuilding projects, and the ICDC.

A formal targeting meeting was conducted weekly to review old targets and nominate new ones. The commander, S3, XO, S2, S5 (fire support officer), civil affairs team leader, company commanders, and company civil-military operations (CMO) representatives attended these meetings.

The S3 ran the meeting — the reality of operating several base camps means that the XO is fully engaged in base camp support. He still surges in the tactical operations center for specific operations, but does not orchestrate the daily security and stability operations for the task force. In addition to the formal targeting meeting, numerous informal and often impromptu targeting meetings took place with ad hoc groups. During peak times, these occurred daily. It is important to note that few targets were ever provided by higher headquarters. Virtually all the targets, with the exception of two or three, were developed from interaction between com-

pany/battalion leaders and local civilians, and all of the offensive operations conducted (with the exception of support to other government agency missions) were initiated by the task force.

One important note — the targeting meeting and targeting matrix do not preclude or replace detailed planning. The MDMP (albeit modified) still has its place in developing operation orders and fragmentary orders and cannot be disregarded. For TF 1-68, the targeting meeting and matrix became a tool for the commander to prioritize targets for the staff and ensure courses of action being developed for combat operations in the S3 shop were coordinated and synchronized with the civil-military operations being planned by the civil affairs and CMO representatives. This sounds elementary, but the reality is that the contemporary operating environment is so complex and requires so many different targets to be addressed simultaneously that, unless units have a plan to do this, it will not get done.

The takeaway for tactical-level staffs is that they must be prepared to develop long-term plans across the spectrum of combat and stability operations that link individual engagements and tactical missions. No other headquarters can accomplish this for the task force because no one will (or should) understand the task force's AOR like its staff and commanders. The

size of the area, the length of the deployment, and the number and variety of tasks being conducted simultaneously necessitate this type of planning. Using the traditional targeting meeting and targeting matrix in a slightly unconventional way is one technique to make the process manageable and maximize the effectiveness of the task force's resources and combat power. Ultimately, it was not the product, but the orchestration of effects the process produces that proved invaluable to the success of TF 1-68 Armor in Iraq.

MAJ Bill Benson is the S3, 1st Battalion, 68th Armor Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, Iraq. He received a B.A. from the University of New Hampshire and an M.A from Tennessee Technological University. His military education includes U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Defense Language Institute, Airborne School, Ranger School, Air Assault School, Armor Officer Basic Course, Infantry Officer Advanced Course, Scout Platoon Leaders Course, and Cavalry Leaders Course. He has served in various command and staff positions, including commander, B Troop, 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment (1-7 Cavalry), 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, TX; S4, Headquarters and Headquarters Troop, 1-7 Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood; scout platoon leader, C Troop, 1st Squadron, 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment (1-3 ACR), Fort Bliss, TX; and tank platoon leader, D Company, 1-3 ACR, Fort Bliss.